

CEO PROFILE



+ Driven to Achieve



Active Green + Ross
President Ralph Chiodo's
strong work ethic and
community involvement have
kept him on the road to success

By Roma Ihnatowycz

As a young boy growing up in southern Italy, Ralph Chiodo knew what he wanted to do when he grew up: he wanted to fix cars.

"I found them fascinating, and I wanted to learn what made them run and what kept them going," says Chiodo, President of Active Green + Ross, a successful Ontario-based auto repair chain. "My family never owned a car. In fact, my father, who died when I was two, was the only one in our extended family who even owned a bicycle."

Growing up in post-war Europe, with a widowed mother, two siblings and very little money, it didn't look like the young Chiodo would realize his dream anytime soon. He had to make do apprenticing in a blacksmith's shop but the young boy still

harboured the hope that one day he would move from fixing plows to fixing cars.

Eventually, after a trip across the Atlantic to his new home in Canada, Chiodo realized his dream. In fact, he realized a lot more. While his professional career may have started under the hood of a car, the once-aspiring mechanic is now better known as a prosperous businessman, a generous philanthropist and the president of one of Canada's premier car repair franchises.

An early start

Chiodo started his auto service career in the early 1960s as an apprentice at a Toronto garage. He quickly earned his inter-provincial mechanics license – quite an achievement for the young Italian immigrant at the time.

After working briefly as a mechanic, in 1966 Chiodo purchased a BP gas station when he was just 23, thanks to a \$7000 loan from a generous uncle. He eventually bought more stations, bringing the total to six, when he felt it was time to reconsider his business model. Franchising was the answer.

"I had had several locations that I was running personally and I thought that the best way to expand the chain into a larger chain was to franchise and to have an owner in each location," says Chiodo, who named his new operation Active Tire and Auto Centre.

Another name change was in store when Chiodo bought the Green + Ross auto service chain in 1993, and in 1995 the company became Active Green + Ross.



Chiodo's first location (at the time, Active Tire) dates back to 1966.



Chiodo (centre) with Active Green + Ross 15-year franchisees Tony Costa (left) and Ralph Sganga (right). Costa was one of Chiodo's first employees in the mid-1960s.

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Chiodo outside of Active Green + Ross' head office.

The buying spree, however, didn't end there. In 2004, Active Green+Ross purchased the Sears Auto Centres in Ontario. Just over two years ago the franchise took over 28 locations of yet another auto service chain.

Today, there are 75 Active Green + Ross locations in operation, and the business continues to grow. It is currently looking to franchise some of its corporate-run centres, and is

also eyeing locations for new franchises. It continues to focus its attention on Ontario, where it holds 10 to 15 per cent of the market share. "There is lots of room for our business to continue to grow here," says Chiodo. "We've had opportunities to go out of province, but we elected not to. There is opportunity within Ontario."

When considering potential franchisees, the repair chain values attitude over experience. In fact, in many cases, it is the franchisees with no automotive experience that tend to end up running the most successful locations. As Chiodo explains, "they relied on our training. So we're looking for people with a certain attitude – attitude beats experience."

Once trained and ready to work, franchisees can expect more in the way of 'coaching' rather than 'managing.' "Our area managers are not area managers, we are coaches," notes Chiodo. "So we coach our associates, we respect them. If somebody makes an error, then we just coach them back to the proper way of doing things."



Giving back

These days Chiodo leaves much of the day-to-day running of Active Green + Ross to his general manager, Peter Steele, and his senior management team, which includes all four of his adult children. Last year he took a sabbatical, challenging himself to work no more than five minutes a week. "I almost

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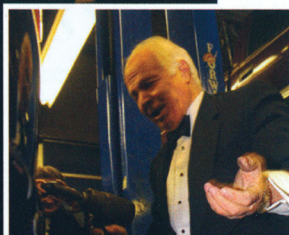
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Chiodo changing tires in his tuxedo as part of a charity fundraiser for the Villa Leonardo Gambin Oak Leaf Gala (above). Active Green + Ross are proud supporters of the 2010 Toronto Blue Jays and participate in fan giveaways (above right).

succeeded," he laughs. Chiodo also spends time in his native Italy, where he owns a second home.

What now takes up most of Chiodo's time is his extensive community and philanthropic work, ranging from running major hospital fundraisers to sitting on volunteer church committees. He organizes the annual Pasta Festa fundraiser for Toronto's Trillium Health Centre, which to date has raised over \$500,000, and sits on the boards of numerous organizations, including the Trillium Health Centre Foundation.

His family was one of 26 Italian families to sponsor the Galleria Italia at the Art Gallery of Ontario, and Active Green + Ross regularly sponsors local events. This includes the Toronto Ribfest-Canada Day Weekend event hosted by the Rotary Club of Etobicoke, where Chiodo has long been an active and leading member. He also chaired the event for 10 years.

The franchise also has a strong social hiring program, developed in partnership with Social Capital Partners, an organization that provides funding to franchises actively hiring people facing barriers in securing quality jobs. "It was a perfect fit for us because it fit perfectly with what we were already doing," says Chiodo. "Several of our locations are involved. It's a win-win for everyone."

There is one project, however, that is especially meaningful for Chiodo: the Ralph and Rose Chiodo Harbourside Gallery at Pier 21, Canada's Immigration Museum in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Chiodo still remembers

Poster from Una Casetta in Canada, an exhibit at Pier 21, Canada's Immigration Museum in Halifax, which outlines inspiring stories of Canadian immigrants.



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arriving at this same pier as a young boy, and today, thanks to his and his wife's generosity, a gallery at the museum has been named in their honour. The museum has also held an exhibit, Una Casetta in Canada, that outlines their inspiring story, along with the stories of other immigrants. "Pier 21 has a very special spot in my heart," says Chiodo. "It is where many of us, including my family, landed."

Giving back to the community has long been a part of Chiodo's life, and now that his responsibilities with Active Green + Ross have eased up a bit, it is a role that he relishes all the more. "The community is where it all comes from, and by giving back we are involved and connected with everyone," he says. "Without the support of the community, our values would be nothing. It's our way of saying thank you."

Key to success

What has been the secret to Chiodo's countless accomplishments? In many ways, his is a classic immigrant success story. And, like many immigrants, he attributes his success to a good old-fashioned work ethic combined with honesty and respect toward his customers, employees, associates and suppliers. His only real challenge, he says, was a simple one: getting potential franchisees to believe in the merits of the Active Green + Ross concept.

"Our biggest problem was convincing people that our program was a good one and that if they followed it they

would succeed," says Chiodo. "Other than that, the automotive business is such a simple business that anyone who fails at it does so because they are not doing the basics. At the end of the day, you drive a car and you need to have it serviced."

Chiodo counsels newly-arrived immigrants to place the same kind of value on hard work and honesty, and to examine successful businesses around them so they can learn from their example. "My advice would be to learn the business, copy successful people, and, most importantly, to be honest, not to cheat anyone and to work hard. It's very, very simple." 🍁

ACTIVE GREEN + ROSS STATS

Franchise Units in Canada: 70

Corporate Units in Canada: 5

In Business Since: 1966

Franchising Since: 1982

Franchise Fee: \$25K

Investment Required: \$115K - \$200K

Website: www.activegreenross.com

Available Territories: ON

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